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ABSTRACT

This study developed a profile of college freshman children of immigrant parents and identified differences in the entering characteristics of these students and the freshman children of native born parents. Data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program survey were evaluated for 97 freshmen with foreign-born parents and 334 freshmen with U.S. born parents at one private, selective liberal arts institution. The survey included questions on high school academic preparation, high school activities, degree and career aspirations, parents' educational achievements and careers, self-assessment of abilities, future activities and personal and political values. Most of the immigrant freshmen were students of color, of which, 43 percent were Asians, 21 percent Latinos, and 6 percent Blacks. Students of native-born parents (hereafter, native freshmen) were mostly White (90 percent). Immigrant parents were at both ends of the educational spectrum, whereas native-born parents were concentrated in the middle and upper end. Immigrant parents were generally in more non-professional occupations, with many small business owners. On average, immigrant parents earned significantly less than their native-born counterparts. Academically, immigrant freshmen were generally equally well qualified as their native counterparts. Immigrant freshmen were more likely to pursue science and premed majors than native freshmen. Immigrant freshmen rated themselves a little lower in academic ability, but higher in drive to achieve than native freshmen. (Contains 11 references.) (CK)

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Walking Two Borders: Freshmen Children of Immigrant Parents

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Abstract

While immigration has become the controversial political issue of 1996, higher education has already been feeling the impact of several million immigrants and their children who came to this country between 1970 and 1990. Yet higher education research has paid little attention to its immigrant students. Using the CIRP Freshman survey, this study draws a profile of freshman children of immigrant parents in one private, highly-selective liberal arts institution. The study found significant differences in entering characteristics of immigrant and native freshmen. Suggestions for future research and the implications of these findings for liberal arts institutions are discussed.

Walking Two Borders: A Profile of Freshman Children of Immigrant Parents

Introduction

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and the fall of Saigon were to have a profound impact on the demographics and the ethnic/racial composition of the United States of America. Between 1965 and 1990, through legal means alone, nearly twelve million immigrants entered this country and before the century is over another five million legal immigrants can be expected to make the U.S. their home . Much of the current and future population growth is expected to come from the immigrants and their offspring (Bouvier, 1992). What is remarkable about this population growth is that it is being led by immigrants from countries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and is significantly altering the ethnic composition of the population of this country. In 1980, Asians and Hispanics represented 7.5 percent of the population; today they are 13.5 percent of the population. By year 2030, they alone will comprise a quarter of the total US population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Thus, most of the non-black minorities of this decade and the next several decades would either be first or second generation Americans, poised at various levels of acculturation and assimilation into the American society.

Higher education, slowly but inevitably, has been affected by the changing demographics and the growth in the immigrant population. From the beginning, the burden of educating the new immigrants, especially those at the low socio-economic and English proficiency levels, has fallen mainly on the community colleges. But the push for diversifying the student population in the

more selective undergraduate institutions in the past ten years has been slowly changing the nativity, and ethnic and linguistic character of its students. For example, a national survey of freshmen reveal that the percent of minorities in four-year colleges increased from 15.5 percent in 1987 to 21.3 percent in 1995, while proportion of asian and hispanic student increased three-fold, from 3.2 to 9.4 percent, during the same period. In the same period, the percent of those who spoke another language at home grew from 4.6 in 1987 to 7.6 in 1995. This trend was widespread across all types of four-year colleges (Astin, Green, Korn, & Shalit, 1987; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995).

Generally, immigrant college-bound or college students have been studied only as a part of, or in comparison, to the larger ethnic group to which they belonged. Thus we know that asian immigrant students, like their native counterparts, when compared with white students, score higher in the math portion of the scholastic achievement tests, tend to concentrate more on technical and scientific fields and spend more time studying and doing homework (Wong, 1990). Though research on hispanic students have focused primarily on their underachievement and limited success in education (Olivas, 1986), there is an emerging body of research which suggest that immigrant hispanics students have greater educational achievements than native hispanics, because their strong educational values motivate them into taking more coursework, completing homework and adopting a less truant behaviour (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Duran and Weffer, 1992).

The purpose of this paper is to draw a profile of freshman children of immigrant parents, and identify, if any, differences in the entering characteristics of these students and the freshman children of native born parents in a private selective liberal arts college. Immigrants, in some respects, are a select group. Whether they choose to emigrate voluntarily or involuntarily, once they are in the new country they attempt to improve their lot economically and socially. Though they are a diverse population in terms of cultures, education, English language proficiency, economic and family situations, they tend to regard education as the prime vehicle for economic security and upward mobility, especially for their children (Caplan, Whitmore, & Choy, 1989; Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Duran & Weffer, 1992). But it is likely that the pathways their children follow for educational achievements are different from those of children of native-born parents. Hence, the focus of this paper is to determine whether immigrant students who enter the higher education pipeline exhibit attitudes, values and goals that separate them from their native-born counterparts.

METHOD

The subjects for this study were drawn from a highly selective liberal arts institution in a mid-atlantic state. In recent times this institution has experienced a considerable increase in its minority and non-English speaking population. The proportion of minority student grew from 14 percent in 1989 to an all-time high of 22 percent in 1994. The proportion of those who called themselves non-native English speaker doubled from 5 percent in 1989 to 10 percent in 1995 and

the percent of freshmen speaking another language at home grew five-fold between 1989 and 1995, from 3 percent in 1989 to 15 percent in 1995.

The principal source of information for this study is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) survey, which is one of nation's longest running surveys. This comprehensive survey is designed to elicit information on all aspects of a student's pre-college life. It includes questions on high school academic preparation, high school activities, degree and career aspirations, parents' educational achievements and careers, self assessment of abilities, future activities and personal and political values. For the first time in 1994, the survey included a question on parents' nativity: "Which of your parents were born in the U.S.?" and included four options: Both, Neither, Father only and Mother only. This question was not asked in the 1995 official survey, but was included by the institution as an optional question. For this study, only two groups of students were included: those who had both parents born in the U.S. and those who had neither parents born in the U.S. For readability, freshman children of immigrant parents are referred to as immigrant freshmen and those of native-born parents are referred to as native freshmen. Also, only students who were citizens or permanent residents of U.S. were included.. Thus the immigrant freshmen were likely to be either first (born elsewhere but educated in the U.S.) or second generation (born and educated here) americans. Whereas, native freshmen were likely to be third generation (parents born and educated here) and more. Of a combined total of 749 freshmen who entered in Fall 1994 and Fall 1995, 500 students participated in the survey, for a 66 percent response rate. Of the 500 respondents, 97 freshmen had foreign-born parents and 334 freshmen had parents who were born in the U.S..

ANALYTIC RESULTS

Demographic and Social Characteristics

Most of the immigrant freshmen were students of color, of which , 43 percent were asians, 21 percent latinos and 6 percent blacks. In contrast, students of native freshmen were mostly white (90 percent). Immigrant freshmen were also more likely to attend colleges that were closer to home (59 percent) compared to native freshmen (32 percent). They were also likely to speak another language at home (Table 1) .

Table 1: Social and Demographic Characteristics of Immigrant and Native Freshmen

Race/Ethnicity	Immigrant Freshmen	Native Freshmen
White/Caucasians	22.1%	90.0%
Blacks	6.3%	3.9%
Asian/Asian-American	43.2%	1.0%
Latino	21.1%	1.8%
Other	7.4%	3.6%
Spoke another language at home		
Frequently	59.8%	1.2%
Miles from college to home		
Less than 50 miles	59.0%	32.2%
51-100 miles	20.0%	23.5%
101-500 miles	9.5%	35.8%
More than 500 miles	11.6%	8.4%

Percentages may not add upto 100 due to rounding

In general, immigrant fathers and mothers were to be found at both ends of the educational spectrum whereas native-born fathers and mothers were more concentrated in the middle and the upper end. Nearly 20 percent of immigrant fathers and mothers had less than high

school education compared to two percent of native-born parents. Though 30 percent of immigrant fathers and 25 percent of immigrant mothers had post-graduade education, still they were less than those of native-born parents (43 percent and 32 percent respectively). Parents' occupations reflected the differences in their educational attainment. Immigrant parents were generally found in more non-professional occupations, with many involved in running their own businesses and trades, compared to native parents. Also, immigrant parents earned significantly less than their native-born counterparts. They were more represented at the lower end of the income scale compared to their native-born counterparts (Table 2).

Table 2: Education and Income of Immigrant Parents and Native-born Parents

Characteristics	Immigrant parents	Native-born Parents
Father's education*		
Less than high school	19.4%	2.1%
High school graduate	8.6%	12.7%
Some college	20.4%	14.5%
College graduate	21.5%	27.5%
Post graduate	30.1%	43.2%
Father's occupation		
Professional	43.0%	56.1%
Manager and Proprietor	14.9%	7.1%
Clerical	2.3%	5.8%
Crafts	6.9%	4.0%
Service	1.0%	1.8%
Labor	10.2%	3.7%
Not employed	4.6%	3.7%
Other	18.2%	17.5%
Mother's education*		
Less than high school	20.6%	2.4%
High school graduate	14.4%	19.6%
Some college	17.6%	17.4%
College graduate	22.7%	28.6%

Table continued on next page...

Post graduate	24.8%	31.9%
Mother's occupation		
Professional	34.8%	47.2%
Manager and Proprietor	4.1%	1.2%
Clerical	4.4%	11.3%
Crafts	4.4%	1.2%
Service	1.1%	2.0%
Labor	7.8%	2.7%
Not employed	5.6%	8.8%
Other	21.1%	15.2%
Homemaker	16.7%	10.4%
Parental income*		
Less than $20,000	27.5%	7.5%
$20,000-$39,999	13.7%	12.0%
$40,000-$59,999	22.9%	16.9%
$60,000-$74,999	13.8%	19.2%
$75,000-$99,999	4.6%	19.6%
$100,000 or more	17.1%	24.7%

Percentages may not add upto 100 due to rounding
* Father's education (chisq = 35.63); mother's education (chisq=37.49); parents' income (chisq=38.80); $p < .001$

Academic Characteristics

Academically, immigrant freshman seemed to be as well qualified as their native counterparts. About 98 percent of them had a high school grade point average of B or above compared to 93 percent freshman children of native-born parents. However, T-test means indicate significant differences in Scholastic Achievement Tests, in activities engaged during the senior year and hours spent on various activities between the two groups. Though immigrant freshmen scored as well as ten native freshmen on the math section of the SAT, their Verbal scores were significantly lower. They seem to achieve academic success by spending more time on

doing homework, socializing less with their friends and spending less time on activities such as sports. They were less likely to be bored in class signifying an active engagement in the learning process. However, freshman from immigrant families also spent more time performing household chores such as child care and tutoring the siblings. While tutoring others enhances knowledge, it is not surprising that they felt overwhelmed by it all (Table 3).

Table 3: Academic Characteristics Freshmen

Characteristics	Immigrant Freshmen	Native Freshmen
High school GPA		
Less than B	2.1%	6.7%
B and B+	45.3%	33.8%
A- and above	52.6%	59.6%
Average SAT Verbal*	530	581
Average SAT Math	597	615
Hours spent per week during last year in school		
Studying or homework**	5.45	4.99
Socializing with friends*	5.03	5.61
Exercising or sports**	4.1	4.44
Housework/childcare duties*	3.18	2.59
Activities engaged in during past year		
Was bored in class**	2.21	2.34
Tutored another student*	2.12	1.86
Felt overwhelmed**	2.32	2.19

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$
Hours spent: 1=none; 2=< 1 hour; 3=1-2; 4=3-5; 5=6-10; 7=11-15; 8=16-20; 9=over 20
Activity engaged in past year: 1=not at all; 2=occassionally; 3=frequently

Degree Aspirations And Choice Of Majors

The importance that college education is given in immigrant households as the means for achieving material success and status is evident from the reasons given by freshmen for choosing to attend college and in the choice of probable college majors. They are more likely to attend college because of their parents' wished so; but they also saw it as an opportunity to make more money. They believed that college education would improve their study skills and make them more cultured which in this context perhaps meant acculturation to american way of life.

The pragmatic approach exhibited toward college education is reflected in their choice of majors and their degree aspirations. Significantly, a greater proportion of immigrant freshmen were interested in pursuing sciences and premed majors compared to native freshmen. Also, fewer immigrant students were interested in studying the humanities (Chi Sq =25.06). Not surprisingly, more of them aspired for degrees in medicine and law, both of which lead to status enhancing and money making careers. In contrast, native freshmen were more interested in pursuing master's and doctoral degrees (Chi Sq=11.04) (Table 5).

When the freshmen were asked to rate themselves on their abilities and skills, T-tests revealed differences between immigrant freshmen and native freshmen. Immigrant freshmen rated themselves a little lower in academic ability , but higher in competitiveness and in drive to achieve, than native freshmen. Their rating of their emotional health was also higher than the native freshmen. Significantly, but not surprisingly, they gave themselves low marks on their writing ability (Table 4).

Table 4: Probable Undergraduate Majors and Degree Aspirations

	Immigrant Freshmen	Native Freshmen
Probable majors (Not all majors are shown here)*		
Performing arts	3.3%	7.4%
Humanities	6.6%	15.7%
Education	7.7%	5.2%
Physical and life sciences	31.9%	21.8%
Premedical	8.8%	3.1%
Social sciences	24.2%	26.4%
* $p < .01$		
Degree Aspirations (not all degrees shown) **		
Bachelor's	6.7%	9.7%
Master's	26.7%	32.8%
Doctorate	24.4%	31.2%
Medical	26.7%	18.8%
Law	13.3%	6.8%
**$p < .05$		
Self Rating		
Competitiveness##	3.72	3.49
Drive to achieve##	4.22	3.98
Emotional health##	3.77	3.52
Writing ability##	3.41	3.67
Reasons for attending college		
Parents wish##	2.16	1.96
Improve study skills#	2.5	2.28
Become more cultured##	2.51	2.35
Make more money#	2.61	2.4
# $p < .01$; ## $p < .05$		

Self-ratings: 1=lowest 10percent; 2=below average; 3=average; 4=above average;5=highest 10%
Reasons for attending college: 1=not important; 2=somewhat important;3=very important

DISCUSSION

Clearly, significant differences exist in the entering characteristics between immigrant freshmen and native freshmen. More immigrant freshmen came from households where parents were less educated and earned less than the parents of native freshmen. However, they were able to overcome these disadvantages and gain admissions into a highly selective institution by studying longer and harder. However, their lower verbal scores and their own low self-rating of their written skills seem to suggest some real deficiency in their English language skills. Their preference for sciences over social sciences and humanities may indicate a certain reluctance to study those majors which require greater facility with the language. Also, immigrant freshmen approach education is quite differently from native freshmen. Clearly, they perceive education as a means to achieve financial success and status. Their degree aspirations reflect this utilitarian approach.

In the discussion of these differences there are two issues that we must consider: One, how much of intra-ethnic differences within the immigrant student population affect the group's differences with the native students; second, how do these differences play up in a liberal arts institutional setup?

The first question is an important one because those familiar with ethnographic research will recognize that some of the characteristics identified above fit the profile of asian students

fairly accurately (Endo,1990; Hsia,1988). However, our population of immigrant freshmen was not large enough to allow for separate statistical analysis for each ethnic group within the sample. Hence we were unable to separate the effects of nativity from those of ethnicity. Clearly, this is a question that ought to be explored further.

Highly selective institutions generally cream off the best high school graduates. Since they admit only academically well prepared students, they usually do not provide remedial or ESOL courses. The learning environment is that of "one size fits all". As liberal arts institutions their primary mission is to provide their students with a broad education designed to mold them into well rounded individuals. How would immigrant students with their limited verbal ability, narrow academic aspirations and materialistic values fit into such an environment? Given these students' motivations, they probably will succeed in the literal meaning of the term, i.e., graduating from college. However, would the college have inculcated the value of a liberal arts education or accomplished its mission of creating wellrounded individuals in them? This question is particularly relevant now since much of the projected increase in high school graduates is likely to come from the immigrant minority population, a good many of whom will find their way into selective institutions. Institutional researchers can help by facilitating a systematic data collection on the nativity, linguistic and generational characteristics of the students, by periodic surveys of students at various stages of their college career and through a careful dissemination of these information to the deans and the faculty.

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